



Burning Issues

Part 1 – National Forest Fire Policy: Managing “unhealthy” forests?

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While fire has always helped shape our landscape, today's fires are not those of the past; they are often hotter, more destructive, and more dangerous to fight. In recent years, most of us have seen televised pictures of wildland fires, evacuated communities, burned homes, and blackened forests, or witnessed these first hand. In part, the reason for the difference is that many of today's forests often have unprecedented levels of flammable materials including among other materials: underbrush, needles and leaves.

A century ago a Longleaf pine forests, which dominated the coastal plain of South Carolina, may have had some 25-50 mature trees per acre and be easily traversed on horseback or by a horse-drawn wagon. Today the forests may have more than hundreds of trees on the same acre, creating conditions that are much too thick for the passage of a hiker. These tightly packed trees are smaller, weaker, more disease prone and more susceptible to insect attack than their ancestors. Such forests form huge reservoirs of fuel awaiting ignition, and pose a particularly significant threat when drought is also a factor. (The US Dept of Agriculture: Forest Service: [Healthy Forest Initiative](#)).

Questions to consider:

1. The federal government has implemented a program called termed the “Healthy Forests Initiative”, which implies that our forests are “unhealthy” today. What has caused our forests to become “unhealthy”, and what role have human actions played in this?